



How to take care of yourself while receiving radiation therapy to the brain

Introduction

Radiation therapy is the use of special x-rays to treat cancer. These x-rays kill cancer cells. But they can also temporarily affect healthy cells. This can cause side effects in the area of the body that is treated. Side effects differ for each person. They depend on the area of the body being treated, the type of radiation used, the dose of radiation and your general health.

Some of the side effects start a few days after treatment begins. Others can start after the second week of treatment. They may slowly progress during and up to 2 weeks after the end of treatment before starting to get better.

This information is to help you to know what side effects you may have during and after your treatment. It will also tell you what to do to help reduce or manage side effects.

Your doctor will follow up with you every week or every other week while you are receiving radiation therapy. Your technologist will give your treatment every day. You can also ask to speak with a nurse. Ask any member of the team (doctor, technologist or nurse) if you have any questions.

What side effects can I expect?

(1) Neurologic effects (short-term)

- During the treatment, radiation therapy can cause temporary swelling in the brain. Your doctor will give you medications to reduce this.
- Common symptom:
 - Headache
- Other symptoms:
 - Nausea or vomiting
 - Feeling dizzy
 - Irritability (short temper)
 - Trouble concentrating
 - Feeling drowsy
 - Feeling weaker
 - Feeling unsteady when walking
- Depending on the area of the brain being treated and the symptoms you have, you may not be able to drive. Ask your doctor.

- If you already have these symptoms and they stay the same, you do not need to tell us.
- **If they get worse or are new for you, tell your technologist. You will need to see the doctor or nurse.**
- If the symptoms are severe or sudden or if you have any seizures, go the Emergency Department. Call for an ambulance. Do not drive.

(2) Neurologic effects (long-term)

- Neurologic effects can develop from 2 months to years after treatment. Some of these side effects can be long-lasting.
- The effects can differ based on the area of the brain being treated. Ask your doctor what effects might apply to your situation.

(3) Fever

- If you are also on chemotherapy, you have a higher risk of getting an infection.
- If you check your temperature and have a fever of **38.0°C for over one hour OR 38.3°C just once, go the Emergency Department.**

(4) Fatigue

- Fatigue, or feeling tired, is a common side effect of radiation therapy.
- It is different than normal feelings of tiredness. It does not get better just by resting.
- What can I do if I have fatigue?
 - Try to remain as active as possible. This is the best way to fight fatigue.
Walking is a good example of a way to stay active.
 - However, listen to your body. You may have to reduce your activities and rest when you feel tired.
 - It is okay if you take naps during the day.

(5) Skin reactions

- When radiation is given, it passes through the skin to reach the area being treated.
- The skin might become red or darker in color, dry, itchy, or even peel or weep (look wet).
- You will lose your hair in the area treated. This will start 2 to 3 weeks after starting radiation therapy. It will grow back 3 to 6 months after end of the treatment.

How should I care for my skin during radiation treatment to help prevent skin reactions?

1) Keep your skin clean

- a. Wash your hair gently with your usual shampoo. Use lukewarm water. Rinse well.
- b. Pat dry with a soft towel.

2) Keep the skin of the area being treated moisturized

- a. If your hair is short, **apply unscented cream or lotion at least twice a day**.
 - For example: Glaxal Base®, Cetaphil®, CeraVe®, Lipikar® or Cutibase®.
 - Avoid creams or lotions with any additives like vitamin E.
- b. Always ask your doctor, technologist or nurse before using another cream or lotion.

3) Protect your skin:

Do	Don't
✓ Protect your scalp from the sun or cold by wearing a hat or scarf.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">⊘ Do not rub, scrub, or scratch the skin on the scalp.⊘ Do not use hair dye or other hair products.⊘ Do not use tape on the scalp.⊘ Do not apply anything hot or cold to the scalp. This means not using heating pads, ice packs, hot water to wash, or the hot setting on a blow dryer.⊘ Do not swim. It can increase irritation of the scalp.

What should I do if I get a skin reaction?

- If you feel your skin is irritated or itchy:
 - Tell your technologist.
 - **Use your moisturizer more often.**

Do I need to follow a special diet?

- You do not need to follow a special diet.
- Try to maintain your weight. Your body needs nutrition for healing.
- It is important to stay well hydrated. Drink plenty of water throughout the day.

What can I do if I feel overwhelmed?

It is normal to feel many different emotions as you start a new cancer treatment. You can feel worried, angry, sad, numb or okay. These feelings can change over time.

What can I do to help myself?

- Talk with someone you trust.
- Talk with your doctor, technologist or nurse.
- Take part in Cedars CanSupport virtual support programs.
 - For information, call 514-934-1934 ext. 35297 or email cedarscansupport@muhc.mcgill.ca.
- If these feelings make it hard to get through your day or to sleep at night, or if you feel very alone, tell your doctor, technologist or nurse. If needed, you can be referred to a social worker or the Psychosocial Oncology Program for help.

Where can I get more information?

If you want more information, the internet can be a way to get it. However, not all information found on the internet is accurate. You can visit these reliable websites:

cancer.ca — Canadian Cancer Society

fqc.qc.ca — Quebec Cancer Foundation

cansupport.ca/cancer-online-information — Cedars CanSupport, information by topic

cancer.net — American Society of Clinical Oncology

cancer.gov — National Cancer Institute

You can also contact the Cedars CanSupport Resource Centre by phone at 514-934-1934 ext. 31666 or by email at cedarscansupport@muhc.mcgill.ca.

What should I do if I feel very sick or there is an emergency?

If you have an urgent issue that is causing you to worry in between hospital visits:

- Weekdays 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM:
 - Call 514-934-1934 ext. 43400 to talk with a nurse
- Evenings from 4:00 PM to 8:00 PM and weekends or holidays from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM:
 - Call 514-934-1934
 - Listen to the options and press the number for the operator
 - Ask for the radiation oncology resident on call

If your symptoms are very severe or you are unable to reach someone, go to the emergency department of the nearest hospital. Tell the doctor that you are receiving radiation therapy.

IMPORTANT PLEASE READ

Information provided is for educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice or instructions of a professional healthcare practitioner or to substitute for medical care. Contact a qualified healthcare practitioner if you have any questions concerning your care.

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